

Ravished Armenia ~ My Two Years of Torture by the Turks



FACING AN UNKNOWN DESTINY

Armenian families herded on a plain outside a city, waiting to be taken away—to the death of starvation in the deserts or death by the sword and club in a massacre.

By Aurora Mardiganian

Continued from Last Sunday.
CHAPTER XIII.

IN the hands of Agha Bekran—the slave dealer of Moush!

Ten thousand Armenian girls, delicate, refined daughters of Christian homes, college girls, young school teachers, daughters of the rich and the poor, have experienced the terror of that same feeling that came over me that day when I realized that I was a captive in the house of this notorious slave dealer of Moush.

We who had been stolen by the Sheikh Zilan, as I told last Sunday, from the church in which my mother and her party were hiding, were driven into a damp, evil-smelling room in Bekran's house. It was the "donkey room"—the room on the street floor of the house in which Bekran kept his donkeys and goats. It was a room from which there could be no escape, and in which we could not even lie down for fear of being trampled upon.

Bekran left us in the donkey room all night. In the morning his hammal, or porter, came in to feed the animals. When he had finished this task he ordered us to follow him.

Bekran awaited us in the selamluk. I shuddered when I saw him—he was so old and withered and cruel looking. A negress waited upon him. He sat on cushions on the floor, in the old fashion. The selamluk was barren and ill-kept. Everywhere there was dirt. Bekran's flowing garments, once of rich texture, were ragged and frayed. Yet I knew Bekran must be very rich—from the profits the helplessness of the Armenians had brought him.

We fell upon our knees before him—then we bent into the posture of the Mohammedans—we wanted so much to make him listen to our pleading. I had suffered so much, I thought surely I could persuade this old man to let me go to my mother again. But Bekran did not even speak. His eyes roved over us—I could feel them. He signed to the hammal and the man lifted us to our feet, one by one, that his master might see our height, our size and judge of our attractiveness. Then he gave another sign and we were taken across the inside court, through a stone doorway, and into a large room where there were a number of other Armenian girls, with here and there a Circassian or a Russian from the Caucasus, among them.

Soon the hammal came into the room with figs and bread. I could not eat, neither could any of the four girls who had been of my mother's party from Ourfa. Few of the others ate, either—as all had come but recently into the hands of Bekran and were too downcast. When the hammal saw that we, who were late comers into the company, did not eat, he said, "That is well. We will lose no time at the bath." He then compelled us to cleanse ourselves as well as we could of the marks of our nights in the sand and in the donkey room, with water from a stone tub in the courtyard.

Two men servants who came into the court while we were bathing then joined the hammal. Together they made us stand in a long line. The girls who had been in the house when we arrived saved us from the whips the hammal and his men carried by telling us what to do. They told us, too, that we were to be marched out into the street just as we were—unclothed—and to the public slave market of Agha Bekran.

There could be no escape. To break away from the line would mean instant death at the hands of a passing gendarme, or capture by soldiers or citizens. We were at least protected from that by Bekran's servants. The slave market was in an old, once abandoned khan, standing almost in the centre of the city. Often in its history this khan had served this same purpose—it was famous, I afterward learned, during the first days of the Sultan Abdul-Hamid as a depot for the auctioning of Circassian girls. Here, it is said, came the agents of rich Turks from all over Turkey, even from the European provinces, to bid for their choice of young women captives.

When the protecting influence of the European nations was lost because of the war, and the persecution of the Armenians began, the slave market was again established—patronized now mostly by the military officials and the local pachas who liked to send Christian girls as presents to powerful friends in government circles in Constantinople.

At the khan some of the girls were left standing on the walk at the side of the road—or sitting on the ground—against the outer wall. One of the servants squatted near, keeping his eyes upon his master's "wares." Inside was a large room. Here sat Agha Bekran, waiting for customers. He paid no attention to us. The hammal gave us no heed, either, once we were inside the door. He sat on a small divan near the entrance and called out to passers-by.

All morning purchasers came. As each one spoke to Bekran the porter would clap his hands and we were made to gather in a circle around Bekran and his customer. Many of these purchasers came, and many girls were sold—but only for a few pennies apiece. There were too many in the market to demand large prices! When a girl was sold she remained until a servant came to take her away.

Late in the afternoon of the second day a customer to

whom Agha Bekran paid great respect entered the khan. He was a servant, but from his clothes I knew him to be the servant of a rich man. From those of us who were left he selected three—and I was one of the three. He seemed to be especially pleased with me. While we stood near he bargained with Bekran. At last the terms were agreed upon. I was bought for one medjidian—85 cents!

Outside the khan was an araba—a donkey cart. The two other girls and I were placed in this. We were taken outside the city, to the country house occupied by Djedvet Bey, the Vali of the province of Van, who was then commander of the Turkish army operating against the Russians.

We were taken to the haremluk, where there were a number of other young Armenian women. Before evening the kalfa, or head servant, came in to us, and we were asked, one by one, if we were willing to become Mohammedans. The kalfa explained that only those would remain in the care and keeping of Djedvet Bey, the mighty Pacha, and have the honor of his protection, who willingly adopted the creed of Islam.

Though he was cruel and, as his deeds show, the most unscrupulous of all Turkish Pachas, Djedvet Bey desired, it was made plain to us, to keep within the provisions of the fetva issued by Sultan Abdul Hamid and still in effect, which pretends to prohibit the enslavement of Armenian and other Christian girls unless they first become Mohammedans.

I did not know what the kalfa would do with me if I refused to accept the creed of Islam. I feared the punishment would be death, or the public khan at once, but I could not bring myself to deny God, after having remained faithful to Him so long. I asked Him what I should do—and His answer came, just as clear and direct as when I was about to use my knife outside the rocks of Diyarbakir, as I have told before. I seemed to see Father Rupen, the priest, and I even felt his hand on my shoulder again, just as when he said to me, "Always trust in God and remain faithful unto Him." I told the kalfa I could not forswear my God.

One of the other girls who had been brought to Djedvet Bey's house with me refused to give up her religion, even to save her life. The third girl had suffered so much—her heart and soul were broken. She gave way. The kalfa put the other girl and me into another room. In a little while both of us were summoned, put into separate arabas and driven away. What became of the other little girl I do not know. I was taken to the house of a Turk whom I soon learned was Ahmed Bey, one of the rich men of Moush. I was a present to Ahmed from Djedvet Bey.

I cannot forget the depression that came over me when I entered the courtyard of Ahmed Bey's house. Twice before, since the deportations began, had I been taken a captive into the houses of Turks and left at their mercy. Yet now, I seemed to feel, all my hopes were to disappear. Perhaps it was because the house of Ahmed was outside the city, in the plains—as a prison would be. And there were twenty-four other girls in the haremluk, each with her own memory of sufferings, more terrible even, some of them, than had been my own.

Ahmed Bey himself was very old, yet some of these twenty-four girls had been sacrificed to him. The others were divided between his two sons. Ahmed was, perhaps, a truer type of the fanatical Turk than any whose victims I had yet seen. His interest seemed not to be so much in the young women themselves as in the children in whom the blood of the noble Armenian race might be blended with that of the savage Turk, and who might live to perpetuate the strain of his family.

I was not summoned before Ahmed Bey until the next day. He had me brought to him in the selamluk—the men's apartments. I had asked for clothing, but the haremluk attaches would not give me any, nor would they allow me to accept garments from the other girls in the harem. "Not until Ahmed indicates his desires," was the answer of the kalfa to my pleadings.

Ahmed Bey spoke to me gently, but it was with the gentleness that hurts worse than blows. "I was to be one of the favored of his women," he said, "because I had been sent to his house by His Excellency, Djedvet Bey." He gave a sign, and a little slave girl appeared with the rich dress of a favored Turkish girl. "Many of these and many ornaments, as well as kindness and affection, shall be yours as long as you are obedient and respectful," Ahmed said. "First, you shall renounce the God you have been taught to worship and accept the forgiveness of Allah and Mohammed, his prophet."

I told him I was weary of suffering, but that I had been given into the keeping of God by my mother, and that I would not desert Him. At this Ahmed became furious. All his gentleness passed away. He trembled in his anger. He upbraided me and my people and blasphemed my religion. I cried with shame at hearing him, but he had no pity. I pleaded with him to free me, that I might return to my mother's party, and I told him of the paper given my mother by Haidar Pacha of Ourfa. But he would not listen.

The little slave was sent from the room, to summon

"Mother moved her lips. 'God of St. Gregory, Thy will be done.' The Zaptieth's whip descended again and again, until her body relaxed, and I knew she was dead. Then he drew his knife and plunged it into little Hovan. In those short minutes all that belonged to me in this world were swept away—mother, Hovan, Mardiros and my little sister."



Aurora's mother and her family, with other refugees, in camp outside the abandoned Armenian church at Moush. It was here the Zaptieths found them when Ahmed Bey ordered them beaten to death to "teach his new slave, Aurora, a lesson." Aurora's mother is in the foreground, her back turned. Sarah is at her left. Hovan is just behind Sarah.

one of Ahmed's sons. The son came in almost immediately. Ahmed called him "Nazim." "This is the one sent me by Djedvet Bey himself. I have set her aside for you, my son, because of her comeliness and youth. But her spirit must be broken. I have sent for you that you might look upon her and decide—what shall be done with her."

Ahmed's son spoke to me, but I did not answer. Then he took my hand, drew me up before him and lifted my face that he might look into my eyes.

"Leave her to me, my father, that I may try to persuade her to be happy in our house," Nazim said.

The little slave led me to an apartment—a small room looking out upon the inside court, with a divan and cushions. I asked her to leave the dress with me, that I might at least cover myself, but she said she could not do that without permission. When she had left me Nazim crossed the court from the selamluk and came at once to me.

He had the same gentleness as his father—and it hurt in the same way. He asked me to accept Mohammed that he might make me his "bride." He told me my sufferings would be very hard to bear if I refused, but that I would have many luxuries if I consented.

I knew I could not escape. My thoughts went to my mother. I told Nazim that as long as my mother was an exile, doomed to die a wanderer, I could not speak of being a "bride." I told him if he would save her, if he would bring her to me, I would ask her if she thought best that I sacrifice my religion in return for my life and

safety—and if she would say that it would be right, then, with her always near to comfort me, I would let my soul die that my body and hers might live.

"You will have to learn it is not the slave's privilege to bargain," he said as he strode away.

Hours went by, and I crouched on the divan—waiting. At every step I feared I was to be summoned again—this time for something I could only expect to be a torture. At last a Zaptieth who belonged to Ahmed Bey's personal retinue came for me. He lifted me roughly and dragged me with her arms across the court and onto the road in front of the house. A little ways from the garden walls there was a group of other Zaptieths.

Among them I saw my mother, little Hovan and Mardiros and little Sarah, my brothers and sister, and others of my mother's party. I had told Nazim what they were when I pleaded with him to restore them to me—and he had sent for them.

I tried to break away, to run toward them. The Zaptieth at my side held me back. My mother was kneeling with her hands lifted to heaven. Sarah ran toward her arms stretched out. "Aurora—Aurora—don't! They will kill us!" Sarah cried. The Zaptieth swung heavy handle of his whip high in the air and brought

Djedvet Bey, Governor of the law of the S. Aurora was so He gave her Ahmed Bey,